

SPOTLIGHT

Household Survey Finds Millions of Americans Are in Denial About Drug Abuse

The 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse provides a more accurate and comprehensive 1-year snapshot of the problem of drug abuse in America than previously available. The survey indicates that the number of Americans who could benefit from drug treatment is significantly larger than previously understood. It also indicates that too many American drug users—more than 4.6 million—who meet the criteria for needing treatment do not recognize that they have a problem.

In early September, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released the annual survey of approximately 70,000 people aged 12 and older as part of the kickoff for the 13th annual National Drug and Alcohol Addiction Recovery Month observance. It is important to note that because of the year-to-year variations in Household Survey data, conclusions about trends are best made by looking at estimates from 3 or more years. The Household Survey is conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (www.samhsa.gov).

Epidemiological Trends

Key epidemiological findings of the 2001 survey include the following:

- Nearly 16 million Americans aged 12 years and older used an illicit drug in the month immediately before the survey interview. This number represents an estimated 7.1 percent of the population in 2001 compared with an estimated 6.3 percent the previous year.
- Some 10.9 percent of youths aged 12 to 17 were current drug users in 2001 compared with 9.7 percent in 2000.
- Youth cigarette use in 2001 was slightly below the rate for 2000, continuing a downward trend since 1999.
- Among young adults aged 18 to 25 years, current drug use increased from 15.9 percent in 2000 to 18.8 percent in 2001. There were no statistically significant changes in the rates of drug use among adults aged 26 and older.
- An estimated 2.4 million Americans used marijuana for the first time in 2000. Because of the way trends in the new use of substances are estimated, estimates of first-time use are always a year behind estimates of current use. The annual number of new marijuana users has varied considerably since 1965 when there were an estimated 0.6 million new users. The number of new marijuana users reached a peak in 1976 and 1977 at around 3.2 million. Between 1990 and 1996, the estimated number of new users increased from 1.4 million to 2.5 million and has remained at this level.
- The number of people who had ever tried Ecstasy (MDMA) increased from 6.5 million in 2000 to 8.1 million in 2001. There were 786,000 current users in 2001. In 2000, an estimated 1.9 million people used Ecstasy (MDMA) for the first time compared with 0.7 million in 1998. This change represents a tripling in incidence in just 2 years.
- About 10.1 million people aged 12 to 20 years reported current use of alcohol in 2001. This number represents 28.5 percent of this age group for whom alcohol is an illicit substance. Of this number,

nearly 6.8 million, or 19 percent, were binge drinkers, and 2.1 million, or 6 percent, were heavy drinkers.

- In 2001, more than 1 in 10 Americans, or 25.1 million people, reported driving under the influence of alcohol at least once in the 12 months before the interview. The rate of driving under the influence of alcohol increased from 10 percent to 11.1 percent between 2000 and 2001. Among young adults aged 18 to 25 years, 22.8 percent drove under the influence of alcohol.

Perception of Risk

The measure of perceived risk in the use of marijuana provides an important predictor of drug use, particularly among youths. As perceived risk of using marijuana decreases, rates of marijuana use tend to increase. Perceived great risk of smoking marijuana once or twice a week decreased from 56.4 percent in 2000 to 53.3 percent in 2001. Among youths aged 12 to 17, the percentage reporting great risk in marijuana use declined from 56 percent to 53.5 percent.

The Need for Treatment

One of the central messages to be gleaned from the findings of the 2001 survey is that many Americans need treatment for addiction, but for many reasons, never get treatment. Consider these facts:

- An estimated 16.6 million people aged 12 or older (7.3 percent of the population) were classified with dependence on or abuse of either alcohol or illicit drugs in 2001. Of these, 2.4 million were classified with dependence on or abuse of both alcohol and illicit drugs, 3.2 million were dependent on or abused illicit drugs but not alcohol, and 11 million were dependent on or abused alcohol but not illicit drugs. The number of people with substance dependence or abuse increased from 14.5 million (6.5 percent of the population) in 2000 to 16.6 million (7.3 percent) in 2001.
- Between 2000 and 2001, there was a significant increase in the estimated number of people aged 12 or older needing treatment for an illicit drug problem. This number increased from 4.7 million in 2000 to 6.1 million in 2001. During the same period, there also was an increase from 0.8 million to 1.1 million in the number of people receiving treatment for this problem at a specialty facility. However, the overall number of people needing but not receiving treatment increased from 3.9 million to 5 million.
- Of the 5 million people who needed but did not receive treatment in 2001, an estimated 377,000 reported that they believed they needed treatment. This number includes an estimated 101,000 who reported that they made an effort but were unable to get treatment and 276,000 who reported making no effort to get treatment.

The Relationship Between Mental Health Problems and Substance Abuse

For the first time in 2001, the Household Survey included questions that measured serious mental illness. Both youths and adults were asked questions about mental health treatment in the past 12 months. The survey found a strong relationship between substance abuse and mental health problems. For example:

- Among adults with serious mental illness in 2001, 20.3 percent were dependent on or abused alcohol or illicit drugs. The rate among adults without serious mental illness was 6.3 percent. An estimated 3 million adults had both serious mental illness and substance abuse or dependence problems during the year.

- In 2001, there were an estimated 14.8 million adults aged 18 or older with serious mental illness. This number represents 7.3 percent of all adults. Of this group with serious mental illness, 6.9 million received mental health treatment in the 12 months before the interview.
- In 2001, an estimated 4.3 million youths aged 12 to 17 received treatment or counseling for emotional or behavioral problems in the 12 months before the interview. This figure represents 18.4 percent of this population and is significantly higher than the 14.6 estimate for 2000. The reason cited most often by youths for the latest mental health treatment session was “felt depressed” (44.9 percent of youths receiving treatment), followed by “breaking rules or acting out” (22.4 percent) and “thought about or tried suicide” (16.6 percent).

For More Information

Findings from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse are available at www.DrugAbuseStatistics.samhsa.gov.